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ABSTRACT

Substitute caregivers are needed by day care centers in every state. Indeed, some areas are experiencing severe shortages of applicants for child care positions and short-term substitute work. This article describes problems encountered in current substitute caregiver systems and suggests ways of dealing with such problems. Specifically discussed are recruitment procedures, screening methods, training programs for substitutes, and the overall administration of a substitute caregiver system. Listed are procedures identified by the Child Care Employee Project in Berkeley, California, that help programs keep substitutes. Subsequent discussion focuses on issues addressed by resource and referral services developing new substitute teacher systems and improving existing systems. Concluding remarks emphasize the importance of continuous recruitment efforts and regular dissemination of updated substitute lists to child care personnel. (RH)

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ESTABLISHING A CHILD CARE SUBSTITUTE CAREGIVER SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The need for substitute providers is a chronic problem among day care centers, family day care homes, nursery schools and after school programs. When childcare staff become ill, a trained person, meeting the state licensing requirements, must be hired temporarily in order to maintain a quality child care program. Finding these qualified substitutes is not an easy task!

This article will describe some of the problems encountered in current substitute caregiver systems, and will present some suggestions. Specifically, the recruitment procedures, screening methods, training programs for substitutes, and the overall administration of such a system will be discussed.

PROBLEMS

When staff are out, many programs operate without substitutes and depend on their teachers or providers to work extra hours or to care for more children than usual. This can become a burden to the staff, especially if a substitute is needed for an extended period of time. Furthermore, it can make a program out of compliance with legally required ratios and group sizes. Unfortunately, many programs simply cannot find substitutes.

Some programs have deliberately operated without using substitutes as a way of cutting corners in the day care budget. Other programs would like to use substitutes but cannot cope with the difficulties of finding a qualified person on short notice.

In the past, child care programs in some areas received an abundance of applications from people seeking permanent and temporary employment. From this pool of potential teachers and aides, substitutes were readily available. In the present economy, however, fewer people are applying for child care jobs and fewer qualified substitutes are available.

One expert reports that the shortage of child care workers has reached the crisis stage in the Boston area this year. This is reflected first in lack of applicants for permanent jobs (some centers have gone for 10-12 months with jobs unfilled). It has also reached a serious level in terms of lack of short-term substitute workers.

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At the same time that programs are having difficulties finding substitutes, parents are becoming more aware of issues of quality. Today's parents are better informed consumers and more likely to report licensing violations.

One basic problem in developing a substitute system is how to keep substitutes avialable, willing and motivated. Substitute wages in the past were usually paid by the center or home at a lower rate than that of teachers or aides. Consequently, substitutes often seek permanent employment in order to gain higher salaries and benefits. Perhaps, if substitutes were paid at a rate higher than or equal to teachers (or aides if an aide is being replaced), the incentive would be greater for substitutes to remain working part-time in their temporary positions. Or, if one or more substitutes could be hired by a program as permanent substitutes, the turnover might decrease.

In addition to setting a good rate of pay for substitutes, the following are ways (identified by the Child Care Employee Project in Berkeley, California) that help programs to keep substitutes:

- Create a set of guidelines to help substitutes know what to do. Included are the daily schedule, where to find needed equipment and supplies, information about the children, common ways of handling behavior, goals of the program.

- Let the substitute know clearly that there is someone to ask for help. This "liaison person" can be a co-teacher or the center director.

- Suggest activities for the substitute which are "sure successes" but take relatively little preparation, supervision, and clean-up such as play dough, story reading, records, drawing.

- If possible, have the substitute visit the center before the first time s/he is called to work. This visit should be paid for at the regular hourly rate.

- When the substitute visits, introduce her/him to staff and children. Responses from children will vary. Some may readily attach themselves to the new adult; others will be more upset by the presence of a stranger. Meeting the substitute through someone children already know, however, may allow them to deal with some of their feelings.

- Have someone from the center make a follow-up phone call to the substitute. Get feedback on how to improve the experience for all concerned.

PERMANENT SUBSTITUTES

One option for child care programs is to add permanent substitutes to their staff. One center could hire staff, or several centers could combine to hire and share substitute caregivers. An example of such a system exists at the Arlington Children's Center, Arlington, MA. This past fall,the Arlington Children's Center hired three permanent substitutes who help cover their six classrooms of 140 full and part-time children. These permanent substitutes were found by advertising in a local newspaper. Two of the applicants had no day care experience, the third is a former day care teacher. All have four-year degrees.

The substitutes received on-the-job training under the supervision of a head teacher and the Educational Coordinator. Each substitue spent "training time" in the rooms before being asked to substitute. Training included observing classroom routines, interacting with children, and assisting teachers with daily activities. The Education Coordinator role-played various classroom episodes to help the substitutes through this introductory period. Classroom duties were discussed such as: helping children to take turns, re-directing children with positive language, helping children verbalize, assisting with art projects, snack and story time. The substitute who is a qualified teacher according to state licensing requirements now works as a replacement for sick head-teachers, and the other two "float" and substitute as assistant teachers when needed.

When these substitutes are not needed to replace a staff member, they supervise special projects or go on field trips with the children, or are sometimes given tasks outside the classroom such as organizing the staff library, carpentry, and shopping.

COMMUNITY SUBSTITUTE LISTS

Community agencies such as Resource and Referral agencies, professional organizations, and day care associations often manage and maintain substitute lists for child care programs. Some lists are utilized only by day care centers or family day care homes. Others are also utilized by parents who require child care due to illness, emergency, or work-related activites.

Work/Family Directions has recently provided support to a number of resource and referral services (R&Rs) which are working on developing new substitute teacher systems and improving existing systems. In reviewing their proposals many of the following considerations and issues were addressed and should be considered by any group developing a substitute list.

RECRUITMENT

Most of the R&Rs plan to advertise for child care professionals and substitutes in neighborhood newspapers and on job boards of local colleges, high schools, and libraries. Other agencies plan to recruit parents for substitutes through the PTA, and will be seeking applicants through Head Start programs, local AEYC affiliates, church groups, senior citizen groups and job banks. Retired teachers or college students are another source of available substitutes. During the summer, many college students work full-time to cover for teacher's vacations.

Family day care providers sometimes have a "back-up" person to call if they become ill or need a substitute provider. This back-up person is very often another family day care provider who is not fully enrolled or who is registered, but no longer operates a family day care home. In some states this person must be approved by the licensing office. In these states the list of approved back-up persons is one source for recruiting substitutes.

SCREENING

Some R&Rs plan to interview the applicant and require a resume, transcript, and application form. Most R&Rs of the Work/Family Directions network also plan to require three references, a health report, TB test, and a criminal record check. The degree of background training varies depending on the position being filled and the licensing requirements of the state.

After screening the applicants, some agencies have found people who are willing to work in the field of child care but have little experience. Consequently, some R&Rs are investigating training programs specifically designed for the non-experienced substitute.

TRAINING

Orientation sessions could be given to all newly recruited substitutes, whether they are "qualified" or not, to review typical program policies, procedures, and familiarize them with the importance and complexity of being a substitute caregiver in a child care program. Written guidelines can also be offered to supplement this orientation such as those used by the Child Care Resource Center of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

When training is provided for the "unqualified" applicants, they can become highly valuable substitutes. One training program already in existence is operated by the Child Action, Inc., of Sacramento, California. This agency provides a three hour substitute teacher and aide training and orientation session every month. The session focuses on the rights and responsibilities of

caregivers, what to expect in a family day care home, or center, basic health and safety rules, and primary level first aid. Infant Care, preschool care, school age care, and in-home care are covered with suggestions on activities, discipline techniques and communication guidelines. Some R&Rs plan to use the trained applicants to provide sick or emergency care for parents as well as substituting for child care providers.

MAINTAINING THE LIST

Developing a reliable system for substitutes involves not only creating adequate standards and conducting thorough recruitment and screening, but also maintaining the substitute list with periodic (often monthly) updating. Names must be dropped of people who have found permanent jobs or who, for various reasons, no longer wish to substitute.

Substitute lists are too often developed at the beginning of the school year, but are then neglected until a teacher tries calling the substitutes and finds no one is available. If a person or committee is designated to keep the substitute list up to date, the list can be more effective and helpful to the child care staff. Ongoing follow-up calls can be made by the R&Rs to their substitutes to verify the subsitutes' availability and continuing interest. Or, a postcard could be mailed inquiring of any changes in schedule, the desire to stay on the list, or a request to be removed from the list. This maintenance procedure is important to keep the lists current. Whether the list is developed and maintained by an R&R, or an individual child care center, both types of lists need on-going review.

MAKING THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE

Some agencies publish a monthly substitute list which centers and family day care homes subscribe to for a fee. Other agencies depend on receiving phone calls for their means of dissemination. When the information is made available by mail, it must be available at least monthly. Even then, subscribers may wish to call-in to verify information toward the end of the subscription period.

When telephone information is used, it will be much more useful if available in the early morning hours.

Operating a substitute system well could require staff time beyond what is easily available. Child Action, an R&R in Sacramento, CA, transferred its substitute program to a temporary employment agency. The agency is responsible for all of the accounting and payroll, maintaining the list, for receiving calls from programs seeking substitutes, and for recruiting and placing the

substitutes. Child Action provides training which is required for all substitutes in the system.

FUNDING

While agencies may find help from a variety of sources in developing a system, it will be necessary for the system to pay for its operating costs in order to survive. The usual method of financing is a subscription fee to providers.

SUMMARY

The need for child care susbstitute caregivers is prevalent nation wide. Some programs have dealt with this issue by adding permanent substitutes to their staff. Others are working on improving recruitment, screening, and training techniques. In the administration of substitute caregiver programs it is important to keep recruitment on-going and to disseminate updated substitute lists on a regular basis to child care personnel.

For More Information:

Child Care Resource Center, Inc., Cambridge, MA
"Guidelines for Day Care Substitutes."

Weiss, Susan. "Substitute Teacher and Aide Training for Child Care Centers and Day Care Homes," in CCI&R Issues, Oct. 1984.